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# In and Out of the Border: The Language and Identity of Hong Kong Literature

Chi Tak Chan

Panel: Currents of Migration

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**CHAN Chi-tak**

## **In and Out of the Border: The Language and Identity of Hong Kong Literature**

The Chinese Civil War of 1946 to 1949, fought between the Communists and the Nationalists, led to an exodus of left-wing writers into Hong Kong. Having fled from political persecution in the Mainland, these exiles continued their writing in the relatively liberal cultural and intellectual climate of Hong Kong, contributing a substantial body of work to magazines and newspapers of what was then only a colony. Following the founding of New China in 1949, some of these writers returned to the Mainland. At the same time, Hong Kong received a new influx of southbound writers either being excluded by or opposing the Communist regime. These two groups of writers were both crossing in and out of the border of colonial Hong Kong, but their fate couldn't be more different. While the majority of the first wave arriving in Hong Kong between 1946 and 1949 returned to the Mainland, many of the post-1940 émigrés were denied return to their homeland and had to settle down in Hong Kong as their place of permanent residence.

Before 1949, the open border of Hong Kong allowed Mainland Chinese free movement to travel in and out of the colony. Contacts and exchanges between the people of Guangzhou and Hong Kong were so frequent that the cities were jointly referred to as *Shenggang* (Guangzhou–Hong Kong). But the days of free movement enjoyed by people in the Mainland and Hong Kong were about to end. The Registration of Persons Ordinance came into effect on 17 August 1949; compulsory identity cards were issued to residents with identification; a Frontier Closed Area was established along the border and curfew was enforced. The beginning of this story of border-crossing marked not only the start of the many twists and changes Hong Kong was about to go through, but also the shaping of the identity of Hong Kong literature.

Hong Kong writers of the 1950s championed the inheritance of modern literary traditions after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Rendered in the form of the *Xinyue* ('New Moon') School, their *xinshi* (new poetry) is pervaded with romantic sentiments and a melancholic yearning for the homeland. Remembrances of bygone eras, lost kingdoms and war efforts spawned a large body of 'literature of homeland nostalgia', a distinct genre of this period. There was a 'sojourner mentality', as reflected in a lack of concern for local issues and a refusal to accept Hong Kong as a permanent abode, but rather treated it as a temporary shelter. The Hong Kong experiences depicted in their work were predominantly negative. One stanza of Xu Xu (1908-1980)'s 'Ideals of the Wilderness' reads:

Years of drifting from place to place,  
I wish nothing but to turn blood and sweat into love.  
To shower upon on the barren land,  
Nurturing glorious lives.

Stranded in a filthy bustling city,  
Rays of sunshine filled with flying dust,  
Pure soil smeared with foul trash.  
Flowers are no longer bright,  
grass no longer green.

Making use of juxtaposition, Xu Xu highlights the contrast between the 'wish' that is lost in a 'filthy bustling city' and the 'glorious lives' of a past that is tainted by the present.

Hong Kong was once described as a 'borrowed place' living on 'borrowed time'. In one respect, the poetry of Xu Xu was emblematic of the sojourner mentality of a generation of nostalgic, homeland-yearning émigrés; in another, it represented a continuation of Mainland Chinese academic and cultural

traditions by these southbound literati and scholars, which planted the seeds of indigenous culture and its foundation in Hong Kong.

The 'borrowed place', 'borrowed time' sojourner mentality was slowly fading and giving way to a local cultural consciousness. Reading the work of Hong Kong writers such as Shu Xiangcheng, Liu Yichang, Xi Xi, Leung Ping-kwan and Dung Kai-cheung opens up a window to an understanding of the real care, concerns and self-reflection writers bring to the city of Hong Kong.

In the days before and after the Reunification of Hong Kong with China in 1997, Hong Kong writers were doing a lot of soul-searching – on China, Hong Kong and the colonial government a process too complex to be defined by a simple concept like nationalistic sentiments. Fifteen years on, Hong Kong writers are, and will continue to, engage in hard thinking that wavers between identifying with China and planting roots firmly on Hong Kong soil.